were stigmatized. Nobody wanted to look like Lena Horne. Everyone wanted to look like Marilyn Monroe."

Venus Xtravaganza, a petite, seductive-looking Puerto Rican pretranssexual noted for his "femme realness," speaks volumes of suffering from racist and economic oppression when he says, "I would like to be a spoiled, rich white girl. They get what they want whenever they want it, and they don't have to really struggle with finances." He deepens the complexity of his identity crisis and his dislocation when he later in the film spells out his wants in simple, direct, poetic statements. He says,

I want a car.
I want to be with the man I love.
I want a nice home, away from New York,
up the Peekskill or maybe in Florida,
somewhere far where no one knows me.
I want my sex changed.
I want to get married in church in white.
I want to be a complete woman.
I want to be a professional model
behind cameras in the high fashion world.
I want this. This is what I want
and I'm gonna go for it.

Venus never lives to have his sex changed or get married in a church in white. Angie Xtravaganza, Mother of the House of Xtravaganza, shares this story. "I always used to tell her, 'Venus, you take too many chances, you're too wild with people in the streets, something is going to happen to you,' but that was Venus. She always took a chance. She always went into a stranger's car. She always did what she wanted to get what she wanted. . . . The [detectives] came to me with a picture of her murdered. They were about to cremate her because nobody had come to verify the body. [They] found her dead after four days, strangled, under a bed in a



sleazy hotel in New York City. . . . She was like my right hand. . . . I miss her. [She] was the main daughter of my house. But that's part of life, that's part of being a transsexual in New York City and surviving."

Pepper LaBeija, Legendary Mother of the House of LeBeija, claims that he has won more ball trophies than any of them, and that he has been reigning for twenty years. Pepper confidently boasts that "New York is wrapped up in LaBeija." The ball circuit confirms his legend. Like Dorian, he has seen the high and low side of drag life. He knows the ball is all some live for. He and Corey explain how the houses function as surrogate families for Black and Puerto Rican gay youth who may be homeless, orphaned, or rejected by their families because of their gayness. When joining a house, it is customary for members to adopt the name of the house for their surname to signify that they "belong" to a family.

"Mothers" are usually those who have made legendary names for themselves on the ball circuit. A mother's duties can be numerous, but the primary function is to manage and nurture the illusions of the children because the children are all-important. A mother must ready the children for competition. They have to be fierce enough to snatch trophies and bring prestige and honor to the house. The highly competitive balls have been likened to street gangs at war over turf or sports teams competing for pennants.

The balls originated in Harlem and have a longer cultural history than that which is revealed in *Paris Is Burning*. Some of the history of the drag balls is traced back to the Harlem Renaissance in Eric Garber's essay, "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem," which appears in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: Meridian Books, 1990). Garber tells us that the balls were called "spectacles in color" by poet Langston Hughes, and that "both men and women could dress as they pleased and dance with whom they wished (p. 324)." Garber also notes that "The largest balls were the